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ABSTRACT

One of the demands imposed on geography instruction is to inform about the world, but there is some disagreement on how this is to be achieved. Criticism is most frequently directed at the regional geography approach of subdividing the world into culture regions. This paper addresses the question of whether global subdivision by culture regions can still legitimately be used in geography instruction. The paper considers culture regions as a regional subdivision on the sub-continental scale, as portrayed in regional geography textbook. It addresses criticism of subdivision by culture regions, both concrete criticism and fundamental criticism. It discusses culture regions as a reality, outlining several possible systems of subdivision. The paper also discusses requirements imposed on subdivision of the world by culture regions and provides examples of subdividing the world by culture regions. It finds that the diversity of possibilities makes it clear to the student that culture regions is an artificial concept that enables people to structure the world in only a few large regions, which is advantageous to achieving the mandatory level of intercultural understanding. (BT)

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Culture Regions in Geography Education.

Dieter L. Boehn

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Dieter L. Boehn **AAG New Orleans**

Culture Regions in Geography Education

Presented at the Congress of the Association of American Geographers in New Orleans, March 6, 2003

Introduction

One of the demands imposed on Geography instruction is to inform about the world. There is some disagreement on how this is to be achieved. Criticism is most frequently directed at the regional geography approach of subdividing the world into culture regions. This presentation addresses the question of whether one can still legitimately use global subdivision by culture regions in Geography instruction.

1. Culture Regions as a Regional Subdivision on the Sub-continental Scale

If one examines regional geography textbooks in terms of the scale of their continental and/or sub-continental units, it becomes evident that numerous culture regions are used. One well-known example of this is de Blij/Muller, on which World Geography lectures are based at many US universities (de Blij/Muller 1997, p. 4-5).
High school textbooks used in Geography courses have also adopted this concept. While there are some differences in the subdivisions made (refer to table below), it can clearly be seen that division is based on culture regions.

World Geography (2000)	*World Geography Today* (2000)	*World Geography, Building a Global Perspective* (2000)
The United States and Canada	The United States and Canada	The United States and Canada
Latin America	Middle and South America	Latin America
Europe	Europe	Western Europe Eastern Europe
Russia and the Eurasian Republics	Russia and Northern Eurasia	Northern Eurasia
North Africa and Southwest Asia	Southwest Asia	Southwest Asia
Africa South of the Sahara	Africa	Africa
South Asia	East and Southeast Asia	South Asia
East Asia	South Asia	East Asia and the Pacific World
Southeast Asia	The Pacific World and Antarctica	
Australia, Oceania, and Antarctica		

Culture Regions in *World Geography* (2000), *World Geography Today* (2000) and *World Geography, Building a Global Perspective* (2000)

Subdivision by culture regions is not only used in the discipline of geography. The political scientist Huntington also structured his book "The Clash of Civilizations" on culture regions .

2. Criticism of Subdivision by Culture Regions

Even though subdivision by culture regions has established itself, this approach is frequently attacked. Such attacks focus on the one hand on concrete criticism of the concept of culture

regions, and on the other the fundamental question of what importance spatial categories actually have.

Concrete criticism of subdivision by culture regions

1. The culture of a region is reduced to the level of clichés.
2. It is not possible to adequately identify the characteristics of a culture. Usually only a few criteria such as religion and other systems of values, history, economy are used as characteristic features.
3. In practice the geographic location and not the dominant criteria are included in the name.
4. Subdivision by culture regions leads students to believe that culture regions are as unchangeable as continents.

These accusations are in part justified and one must face and address them. This criticism does, however, focus on specific details and does not categorically reject spatial subdivisions on the basis of cultural criteria.

Fundamental criticism of any type of generally valid regional categorization appears to be even more significant. It is based on the following theses:

Fundamental criticism of subdivision at the spatial level

1. Globalization has triggered the emergence of a world culture that is having an increasing effect on regional cultures.

In principle this view is correct and can be verified by numerous examples. However the spread of identical material goods, the same type of clothing, style of architecture and identical eating habits do not constitute a world culture.
Admittedly, aspects of globalization in cultural terms can be recognized in the field of ideas and material objects, however the assumption that there is "a global culture" is an oversimplification. In reality, such assumptions are currently not justified.

The second view suggests exactly the opposite:

2. There is no common culture, not even within a defined region.

This view is a result of the "cultural turn" in the humanities on Human Geography. The geographer Rob van den Vaart[1] formulated this principle as follows: "Culture is no longer conceived as uniform over a region or within a population, but as inherently fragmented." In Germany the geographer Benno Werlen's theory that there are no longer any super-individual regional units, but rather that individual persons "create geography" or "create spatial structures" daily by their actions was well received.
In principle, this view of cultural differentiation on the basis of the individual level is also correct, it places emphasis on views that to date have been neglected. It is also correct to permit a great variety of possible individual regional structures. However this approach creates a virtually infinite number of subjectively defined regional structures. This consequently renders it impracticable for subdivision in World Geography courses.

3. Culture Regions as a Reality

Must we give up subdivision of the world into culture regions and simply accept that the world is so complex that we can at best inform our students on an individual level? Is there a better means of subdivision on a sub-global scale?

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[1] Rob van den Vaart: "Other Culture" in School Geography: What does Academic Geography Have to Offer?
(In: Stöber, Georg, Editor (2001): *„Fremde Kulturen" im Geographieunterricht = Studien zur internationalen Schulbuchforschung*, Volume 105. p. 156-163).

Let us examine only a few of the many possible systems of subdivision:

- Languages as cultural characteristics
- Human Development Index
- Differences in population growth in the world's regions
- GDP
- Illiteracy rate
- Utilization of the internet.

All of these criteria are to be sure possible, but if one examines the maps showing these subdivisions, the result is a very unordered puzzle of units. We should, in the interest of sound didactics, attempt to construct large, contiguous regions that are characterized by common characteristics.

It has been demonstrated that cultures are suitable for subdivision on this basis.
Cultures are a suitable subdivision on this basis.

Let us justify it by giving two important reasons:

1. In their regional differentiation, cultures also have a great *economic* significance.
In a research project[2] that investigated business relations involving German and Chinese companies, it was revealed that cultural differences were among the key factors on which business success hinged. Evaluation of published literature and interviews with American consultants in Shanghai showed that the significance of business culture also applies to Chinese-American business relations. Even though the Chinese business partners all spoke English and in terms of their outward appearance had nearly entirely adapted to western customs, their Chinese culture had a substantial impact on their behavior. To mention just one example, personal relationships have a higher rank in China than contracts.

2. On a *political* level as well, culture regions play a very important role. This is currently quite evident in Europe. In December 2002 the members of the European Union passed a resolution to admit ten new countries. Most of these countries lie to the east of today's EU in a region that has always been considered a part of Europe. Whether or not to admit Turkey has been the subject of debate for some 40 years. Previously formal criteria such as respect for human rights were mentioned. In point of fact, however, the issue is really culture: does Turkey culturally belong to Europe? Or is Turkey a part of the culture region Near East which it had dominated for centuries up until 1918.

4. Requirements Imposed on Subdivision of the World by Culture Regions

1. Culture regions are artificial and therefore to some extent arbitrary concepts. They are defined by certain elements, which are shaped by the people that inhabit these regions. Geography education has to admit this to the students as Boehm does in his textbook.

> Geographers often divide the planet into areas called **culture regions**.
> ... Geographers with varying viewpoints may use different ways to decide the number of culture regions and the countries included in each. ...
> ... Geographers as well as political scientists, economists, sociologists, and anthropologists, might divide the world into different culture regions...
>
> World Geography (Glencoe) (Author/Editor: Richard G. Boehm) (2000), p. 74

[2] FORAREA: Foreign Area Studies. Business Relationships, Illustrated on the Example of China.

2. Culture regions are not entities that are prescribed by the space in question. Consequently there are no unique relationships between nature and space as postulated by de Blij / Muller: "Geographic realms are the result of the interaction of human societies and natural environments" (p. 3). All culture regions encompass numerous different natural regions. There is no evidence that highly-developed cultures have a certain physical-geographical environment. Consequently the highly-developed ancient cultures of Egypt, China and Mesopotamia, for example, are not at all identical, even though each developed in a region in which a major river contributed to the practice of systematic irrigation.
3. Culture regions are regions in which cultures are widespread. These areas are created by the actions of their inhabitants.
4. Culture is reflected in both *objects* and *ideas*. Values are the most important element of culture.
Material culture includes things that people make, such as food, clothing, architecture, arts, crafts and technology.
Nonmaterial culture includes religion, language, spiritual beliefs, and patterns.[3]
5. Assignment to the various culture regions is performed independent of the individual criteria that define culture, primarily on the basis of two types of ascription:
1) Self-ascription ("we are Europeans", "We are Latin-Americans")
2) Ascription by others ("They are from the Near East"; "They belong to the East-Asian culture region").
6. To date, Geography concentrated excessively on the regional impact of culture. Geography instruction must go far beyond this level. Spatial patterns and their interpretation are not enough.
7. Geography instruction must take an interdisciplinary approach and include topics that define the culture of a region. These include:
- Religions and values
- Political systems (as an expression of ideologies)
- History
- Type of economy and economic development
- Fine arts and literature
- Everyday way-of-life.
8. Cultures are inherently dynamic, they undergo constant change.
9. Within a society cultures are differentiated, they are thus also not monolithic on a spatial level. Cultures are thus always linked to the force exerted by the dominant cultural group.
10. Cultures are not isolated from each other, they influence each other. In the age of globalization the influence of foreign cultures, above all the American culture, has sharply increased. Nevertheless those cultures that form the other culture regions have survived.

By conveying an understanding that cultures can also be grasped spatially, geography instruction makes a contribution to intercultural competency.

As you can see, my thoughts have also been influenced by American World Geography textbooks. I consider their fundamental principles important, above all the scope of the cultural topics dealt with.

I am convinced that the deciding factor now is to go even further than the American textbooks and heighten student awareness of the arbitrary nature of the criteria used and call their attention to the global web of connections that prevails today.

5. Examples for Subdividing the World by Culture Regions

The accusation that using culture regions in instruction suggests a subdivision brought about by the spatial structures of the region itself should be countered by presenting several

[3] World Geography. Building A Global Perspective (Authors: Thomas Baerwald and Celeste Fraser), 2000, p. 84.

possibilities for subdivision to the student and stating the respective criteria used for defining them. In closing, I would like to illustrate this with three examples. (The maps shown in my presentation are not included in this print version). Of course there are many other possibilities as well.

1. Culture Regions after *Glencoe World Geography, 2000, p. 74*
Criteria stated by the author Richard G. Boehm (p.74-77):
- Governments
- Social Groups
- Economic Systems
- Language and Religion

2. Another possible subdivision is that of S.P. Huntington:
Huntington states the following criteria used in his subdivision:
- origin
- religion
- language
  history
- customs and traditions
- institutions

3. The final example I would like to present is as follows:
- history
- self-description (or description by others)
- economic and social system

It is very important to explain that the subdivision is created not by nature, but by the number and the weighting of the criteria. Therefore one should ask students to subdivide the world into culture regions, using those criteria they personally feel are most important.

Above all the diversity of possibilities makes it clear to the student that culture regions is an artificial concept that enables us to structure the world in only a few large regions. This is advantageous to achieving the mandatory level of intercultural understanding and we have seen that it is objectively justified.

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